

Manchester in New Verbal

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A new war of words blazed today over author William Manchester's already battle-scarred book, "The Death of a President."

In the current issue of Commentary magazine, Edward Jay Epstein, himself the author of a critical book about the Warren Commission, charged that Manchester's original draft was myth-promoting "melodrama" based on the notion that Lyndon B. Johnson "was somehow responsible for the death of his predecessor."

Claiming that he had read Manchester's unedited first draft, Epstein said that it had

portrayed Johnson as "an octopus, clutching bunches of black bananas," and as a "chameleon, who constantly changes loyalties."

At his home in Middletown, Conn., Manchester countered in a telephone interview that Epstein's article was "an absurd and mischievous attack" that demonstrated "diabolical cunning in wrenching phrases out of context."

Manchester, whose dispute with the Kennedys over his book simmered down last January after an out-of-court settlement of their differences, claimed last night that Epstein's article apparently was "inspired by the very advisers who misled Mrs. Kennedy." He charged that these advisers had "served her ill" and that they are "still smarting."

Despite the vigor of his counterattack, Manchester, however, did not state that specific passages cited by Epstein were not in his first draft of the Kennedy book. He also would not confirm whether specific passages had appeared in the draft.

Main Objection

Manchester's main objection appeared to be that Epstein's article, as a whole, gave what Manchester considered a completely erroneous impression of what he had been trying to do.

"What is really poisonous," said Manchester, "is his suggestion that I portrayed Lyndon Johnson as being somehow responsible for the President's death."

Certain phrases that had seemed "felicitous" when he wrote them later appeared "unfortunate," Manchester said, and he himself crossed them out. The author said it appeared that Epstein somehow gained access to such a copy of the draft.

"Even when I recognize a phrase here and there, the material as a whole is unrecognizable," Manchester said.

"This just doesn't stop," he

said, apparently referring to the months of controversy that already have surrounded "The Death of a President."

'Mythopoeic Melodrama'

"I tried to answer every question as best I can," he said. "I do think it is unfair to take an author's early draft and then attack him on the basis of passages that he himself expunged. I think any writer will understand what I mean."

In the Commentary magazine article, Epstein charged that Manchester not only originally prepared "a mythopoeic melodrama organized around the theme of the struggle between two men, John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson," but that facts also suffered when the time came to make changes in the manuscript.

"... Tempering the book's inordinately anti-Johnson tone did not enhance its claims to

War on Book

accuracy," said Epstein, "for Manchester seems to have been willing to reverse facts as he was to make the requested thematic revisions."

Manchester, on his part, also claimed errors in Epstein's article.

However this conflict turns out, it was clear that the Epstein article represented the first publication of a number of sharply critical references to Johnson claimed by Epstein to

have been in Manchester's first draft.

In addition to the alleged "octopus" and "chameleon" references, Epstein claimed that Manchester's first draft also portrayed the President as "an oyster who patiently converts bits of grit into salable pearls" and as "the crafty seducer with six nimble hands."

Manchester, answering questions about his over-all portrayal of Kennedy and Johnson, main-

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tained that he had been describing "not two men but two offices." Thus, he said, he meant to contrast the nature of the presidency and the vice presidency rather than personal characteristics.